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Childhood Memories in Mayfield, Kentucky: Trips to Paducah

TRIPS TO PADUCAH

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Those early years were highlighted by the trips we made to Paducah, twenty-five miles north of Mayfield. These excursions took more than two hours one way, for the road was a narrow and bumpy two-laner, not built for cars. Along the way we passed small farms, where horses and mules were used to cultivate vegetable gardens, corn, wheat, dark tobacco, and other crops. It was not unusual then to meet farmers and their families on the road in horse-drawn buggies and in wagons loaded with hay or corn and pulled by mules. A number of years passed before they became accustomed to the "monsters" on the road, and many shied at the sight of a car or even ran away if the driver did not place a firm, restraining hand on them. After such an incident we drove slowly by, more frightened than the animals.

Then there was the matter of blowouts. Our father parked the car on the side of the road next to a fence or the entrance to a farm and removed the cushions of the back seat to gain access to a compartment containing tools, a jack, and a tire repair kit. The early cars had tire rims attached to the wheel and the tires attached were used and considered a great improvement. As we waited, the car was jacked up, a patch applied to the punctured inner tube, and a hand pump used to inflate the tire, which was replaced with no guarantee that another blowout would not occur in a short time.

Cranking the early vintage car like the Ford was relatively easy. The boys in our family had been taught the correct way to hold the arm in such a manner that the hand would automatically release the crank if the engine backfired and forced the crank to reverse its rotation. Though no one in our family received a broken wrist, carrying one's arm in a sling became a status symbol for a "man of property."

While our father operated the gasoline and spark levers, one of our brothers gave the crank a turn or two and the car started. We were on our way again. We passed through two villages, Hickory and Folsomdale and drove over the hills and around sharp curves in the road. We passed massive groves of oak, poplar, hickory, and sweet gum trees, for much of the land had not been cleared. There was a small frame church on the summit of one of the hills, and from the car we could observe the cemetary nearby with unpretenious memorial stones and well-kept graves. As children and teenagers, we made these trips during vacations in the summer. By that time the fertile land had produced heavy undergrowth along the fences that enclosed the farms. Here and there we noticed the large orange blossoms of the trumpet vine, the wild pink roses, and patches of blackberries in various stages of ripening–green, red, and black. Sometimes we caught a glimpse of a mother and one or two children carrying buckets or baskets

and wearing cotton bonnets and long sleeve dresses to protect them from the sun and thorny branches, as they picked the lush ripe berries.

Those rare times when we made the trips in the early spring and late fall, inclement weather posed other problems. In the "touring car" canvas side curtains with isinglass windows protected us from the rain. Usually, however, we waited until a downpour started before attaching them to the body and top of the car. The cloth had to be stretched to fit the snaps and by the time this chore was accomplished we were wet and unhappy. Then the person sitting in the front seat had to operate the windshield wiper by hand. Sometimes the car slipped into a rut or pothole in the road, and no amount of pressure on the engine could force the car forward. We waited on the side of the road while our father and brothers placed their backs to the rear wheels and lifted the car out of the hole. Actually the early Fords were so light that a fourteen year old boy could move the car with little difficulty.

About midway between Mayfield and Paducah the road crossed Mayfield Creek, and according to Bill it was "a large and mysterious stream to a young boy who had never been outside of Graves and McCracken counties. Just beyond as we traveled north were two sharp curves," he continued, "that had to be negotiated at slow speed, one at the bridge and the other one part way up Leader Hill. These curves, the road grade and the small power of the engine required a certain amount of daredevil driving to surmount the hill without changing gears. To accomplish this feat, the driver had to negotiate the curves at an unsafe speed, but a successful attack became the subject of many conversations and a source of pride among many men at that time. It was considered an attribute to both their driving ability and the power of their automobile."

Paducah, at that time, was a second class city with a population of more than 21,000 people, and since the formation of McCracken county in 1824 it had become a river, rail, and marketing center of the Purchase. Whenever we entered Jefferson Street and saw the Statue of Paduke, who was the legendary Chief of the Chickasaws and for whom Paducah is named, we gave a sigh of relief for we knew at last we had reached our destination. Buying supplies and shopping were the stated reasons for making the trips, but actually they were outings for the family. There were numerous shops, the Palmer House Hotel, a ten-story bank building, an awe-inspiring sight to us, a market house, now known as the William Clark Market House Museum, hard surface streets, and street cars.

Our father and brothers usually went to Petters Supply Company, a regional distributing company for iron, steel, brass supplies, and fittings on the river front. Even then Paducah was an important river port, and they never tired of seeing the wide expanse of the mighty Ohio, to the early French explorers "Ohio ou la Belle Riviere," and Owen's Island upstream. Here the Tennessee River flows into the Ohio and makes a natural boat harbor, where colorful river packets and other marine craft were always anchored.

In the meantime we were shopping or window shopping, for we wanted to see the latest fashions in clothes. Our mother made many of our dresses until we were older; then dressmakers designed and made our better clothes. In the stores we spent more time in the section where yard goods were sold along with the trimmings and notions, buttons, hooks, beads, lace, ribbon, and patterns. Cotton material, gingham, and linen were available and everything for the dress was bought at one time. People were very careful to buy only the amount needed and no more, for the extra length added to the cost. There was an occasional purchase of a coat or jacket and children's shoes, which never fit; they were either too small or too large. I vividly recall another purchase we made, a pink linen middy dress. The style, fashionable then, consisted of a loosely fitting blouse with a sailor collar and full skirt. Even though it was bought on sale, my mother thought it too expensive for its limited use. To me the dress represented the epitomé of high fashion.

By mid-afternoon we left Paducah and retraced our route to Mayfield, exhausted and glad to be home again. It should be added that in spite of the difficulties in traveling, we were excited and happy to make the trips. In many ways they were luxury excursions. The alternatives included going by horseback or horse-drawn carriage, which took almost a day one way and by local train in coaches covered with cinders, leaving Mayfield in the early morning and returning at five o'clock in the afternoon. We had no way of knowing that in time would the incredible space shuttles that can fly in one brief moment over the course we traveled many years ago.